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ABSTRACT

Second language classroom techniques and activities promoting oral proficency are suggested and discussed. The suggestions are based on a course organization that focuses on basic communicative goals and uses frequent conversation between paired students. The activities include retelling partner responses and situational role-playing. Approaches to integrating topics such as numbers, grammatical points, and vocabulary into the proficiency-based course design are discussed, and test techniques and items are also suggested. (MSE)

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CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING ORAL PROFICIENCY

Presented at Youngstown University
by Joni Hurley - October 24, 1986

The La Roche College language department received a planning grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for 1984-1985 to study oral proficiency and it's impact on the curriculum. Dr. Jeannette Braggar and Dr. Dorothy James served as valuable consultants on this project. From these meetings, the faculty learned the theories of oral proficiency. The basic underlying principles are:

1. To teach students to communicate on a variety of survival topics;
2. To allow students to make mistakes, the correction of which should not be considered the most vital goal -- the goal is communication;
3. To teach students to comprehend what someone is saying to them;
4. To give students the skills necessary to read in the target language;
5. To teach communication based on the real world rather than the classroom world;
6. To allow for the learning of a flexible vocabulary -- if the student doesn't like something (like liver), he or she will never need to know how to say it in the target language.

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These points would likely be accepted by nearly all foreign language educators. However, how closely the classroom experience comes to these basic goals can be quickly seen in the course outline. A non-proficiency-based outline would contain descriptions like:

September 15 agreement of adjectives; numbers 1-20; regular ar verbs; food

September 19 Agreement continued; numbers 20-100; regular er verbs

These examples do not fit the principles of oral proficiency. They are simply the listing of grammatical and lexical items organized by their placement in the textbook. To convert such an outline into one focusing on proficiency, the teacher must ask himself or herself: "When do you use . . .?" The answer to that question, posed for each grammatical and lexical category, will provide oral proficiency topics. The outline can then be reorganized to fit these topics:

September 15	Goal:	describing things	(context)*
		1. vocabulary	(accuracy)
		2. agreement of adjective	
		3. location of adjective	
September 19	Goal:	going shopping	(context)
		1. vocabulary	(accuracy)
		2. asking prices	
		3. numbers	
September 23	Goal:	discussing activities	(context)
		1. vocabulary	(accuracy)
		2. verb forms	
		3. forming questions	

*Context and accuracy are the traditional words for describing such organization. The functions, the third category, tend to be almost exclusively asking and answering questions when at the elementary level.

A foreign language, organized around conceptual ideas as in the above examples, is much more practical and understandable to the students. It will be clear to them that the grammatical points and lexical items listed under each goal will need to be mastered in order to successfully accomplish the goal.

What happens to the grammatical items that are covered in the textbook that do not fit into the structure of the new outline? They can either be omitted or saved until they tie into a communication objective. There is no rule that says that every point in a textbook must be taught. The students retain more by memorizing fewer grammatical rules and controlling more communication skills.

Once the outline has been restructured, much thought will need to be given to the preparation of each lesson plan. In every class session, the students should be paired up at least once, either to drill a grammar point or to practice conversation. The more the students converse in the target language, the better they become.

If the teacher tells the students to pair up and converse, the result will most likely be silence, or the use of English. The teacher must carefully structure what the students will talk about, while allowing as much freedom of expression as possible.

Some easily adaptable classroom activities to practice conversation in pairs include:

1. Having the students fill in charts with responses they have obtained in the target language from their partners. For example:

   a. Find out from your partner the prices of these items:*

      el chocolate ..... $_____

      el café ..... $_____

   b. Find out if your partner does these things:*

      hablar español

      comer en un restaurante italiano

2. Giving each pair of students a situation card that lists, in English, the points they will cover in their conversation. Each pair's card will be somewhat different, so those who finish quickly can exchange cards with another group. For example:

   a. You meet a new student in the hall:

      (1) Say hello
      (2) Exchange names
      (3) Find out where he/she is from
      (4) Find out what he/she is studying
      (5) Say goodbye

   b. You are on vacation in Mexico. You go to the store to buy a souvenir.

      (1) Say hello
      (2) Explain what you are looking for
      (3) Find out how much it costs
      (4) Decide whether or not to buy it
      (5) Say thank you and goodbye

   These situation cards can be adjusted to any level of knowledge.

*Each half of the pair of students will have a different list of ten items. These charts can be easily adapated to drill almost any grammatical point in a conversational structure.

3. Giving students cards telling them who they will pretend to be (for example: Madonna, Richard Burton, President Reagan, etc.). The other members of the group will then ask him/her questions based on his/her life as that person. For example:

   a. Where were you born?
   b. How old are you?
   c. Are you married?
   d. How many children do you have?
   e. What work do you do?
   f. What are you planning for the future?

4. Selecting famous people in the target culture whom the students have to research. Each student will then present to the class a quick sketch of his/her life as that person. Then the class will ask questions. If no one asks questions, the teacher can quiz them on what was said. The famous people selected should be from a variety of fields: political, literary, historic, artistic, etc.

In activities such as Number 1 above, there will be little room for grammatical errors. However, in activities 2, 3, and 4 errors can become quite frequent. The students will be formulating long sentences and may forget to make an adjective agree, for example. The teacher should not correct every mistake heard, but only the major ones that interfere with communication. Too much correction trains the student to keep quiet or speak in short utterances to avoid making mistakes.

Many times teachers are surprised to hear students making mistakes on a grammar point that was clearly covered and understood by everyone. While this can be very frustrating, it demonstrates

how much practice is really necessary before a student can use the grammatical point correctly in conversation.

One key example is the agreement of noun and adjective. This is not only an elementary task, but should be practiced at all levels. Have students describe things: things they bought, things they received for Christmas, things they saw on vacation, things that are found in their house, etc. It is amazing the number of opportunities that are missed for having students describe.

Another good way to practice agreement, and with a different group of adjectives, is describing people. Have students describe: famous people, their families, their friends, their classmates, etc. Every week or so these opportunities will present themselves, and should not be overlooked.

It is also surprising how long it takes students to really know the numbers. Each time a new topic comes up, the numbers should be drilled again. Pair students and have them ask each other prices: prices of groceries, clothing, furniture, going places, items on a menu, etc.

The past tenses are other grammatical structures that require a great deal of practice. Students may be able to recite endings with ease, but may be unable to communicate an idea in the past. Once the endings have been taught, the students need to practice using them, even when something else is being studied. Have them narrate in the past by describing: a trip they took, their first date, what they did last summer, what they did last weekend, an interesting experience, a movie plot, etc.

Sometimes, according to the students, they never did anything interesting. Although this may be a ploy to avoid the past tense, many

times they feel their lives are not interesting. As a last resort, have the students describe a fantasy weekend. This is first written at home, and then is retold (not read) to the class.

The past tenses are also put to excellent use by having the students summarize a reading. This is a rather complicated task, and should not be used too soon. It offers the added benefit of having the students comprehend, reword, and express ideas.

All of the aforementioned techniques and ideas will come as a pleasant shock to those students who have studied a language without emphasis on oral proficiency. It should be explained in the very first classs that grammar is important, but only for communicating messages. Therefore, conveying an idea is first, and grammar is second. But, if the grammar is destroyed, no idea is conveyed. Students really like the change, since they are studying the language to learn to speak it, not to conjugate verbs.

Also, in the first class have students list, in English, ten things they like, ten things they like to do, ten words they would like to describe things, and ten words they would like to describe people. Then organize these lists. Irregular verbs should be isolated and explained at the end of the list of regular verbs. A student should never be told he/she can't use the word "sleep," for example, in a Spanish I class because it belongs in Spanish II. If sleeping is important to a student, then he/she will learn it, regular or not.

All of the vocabulary compiled in this fashion will be colorful and indicative of each student's personality. It will also contain most of the words the teacher would choose if he or she prepared the list. The ten items in each category are typed into a

list in the target language, including everyone's likes. When describing things, students will be given two lists--one of things and one of descriptive words. When the students first see the lists, they are terrified that they will be quizzed on this large amount of vocabulary. They are told to learn only the words that matter to them. This is somewhat deceitful, because each person will select a different vocabulary, and the students will each be exposed to other people's chosen words. By the end of the semester, they will all know about three-fourths of the vocabulary on the list.

Testing students who possess a varying knowledge of vocabulary in a means consistent with proficiency at first seems nearly impossible. The test must:

1. Fit a wide range of vocabulary;
2. Test grammar in true-to-life situations (i.e., describe what your family does in the summer versus fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb in parentheses).
3. Be graded flexibly--slight misspellings must be permitted--the students are being required to develop sentences and paragraphs at an early level.

Generally, such tests are written in English. The students will be required to produce a great deal of the target language. Some grammatical and lexical categories and sample questions are:

1. Agreement of noun and adjective:
    a. Describe the pictures you are shown.
    b. Describe three people that are important in your life.
    c. Describe three presents you received for Christmas.

2. Verb forms:

   a. Describe a party you are having, and tell what everyone is doing.

   b. Your aunt calls: tell her what is happening.

   c. Describe your favorite TV show.

   d. Describe a trip you are planning.

3. Commands:

   a. A friend is planning to travel to Spain. Make a list of ten recommendations.

   b. A friend wants to become more popular. List ten suggestions you have.

4. Food:

   a. You are planning a party. Make a list of ten items you need from the grocery.

   b. Describe your favorite dish.

5. Weather, seasons:

   A friend in Mexico wants to know what the weather is like where you live. Describe the weather in each season.

6. Furniture, appliances:

   a. You are buying a new insurance policy. Make a list of your most important possessions.

   b. Describe your living room.

7. Clothing:

   You are planning a trip to the beach. Make a list of the clothing you want to take.

It will be evident that in all of the above grammatical examples, students will be required to produce the necessary vocabulary as well as the correct grammatical structures. This is the same demand that is placed on them any time they communicate in the language.

The incorporation of proficiency-based instruction into the foreign language curriculum revitalizes the program, inspires the instructors, and motivates the students. A great debt of gratitude is owed to those who pioneered this movement, and made the field of foreign language education so dynamic and rewarding.

VOCABULARY LIST

ITEMS SELECTED BY THE STUDENTS

AS BEING IMPORTANT*

la ropa (clothing)
- los zapatos (shoes)
- los abrigos de piel (fur coats)
- la camisa (shirt)
- la bolsa (purse)

las joyas (jewelry)
- los diamantes (diamonds)
- los ópalos (opals)
- los anillos (rings)
- el oro (gold)
- la plata (silver)
- los aretes (earrings)

los animales (animals)
- los caballos (horses)
- el osito Teddy (Teddy bear)
- los conejos (rabbits)
- los pájaros (birds)
- los perros de lana (poodles)
- el pastor alemán (German shepherd)
- las vacas (cows)
- los monos (monkeys)
- los perritos (puppies)

la gente (people)
- las mujeres (women)
- los hombres (men)
- los niños (children)
- los bebés (babies)
- los amigos (friends)
- mi familia (my family)
- los payasos (clowns)

la comida (food)
- el vino (wine)
- los camarones (shrimp)
- la crema de Chantilly (whipped cream)
- los cubitos de hielo (ice cubes)
- el chicle globo (bubble gum)
- los dulces (sweets)
- el helado (ice cream)

la naturaleza (nature)
- el aire fresco (fresh air)
- la biología (biology)
- el océano (ocean)
- las flores (flowers)
- las plantas (plants)
- las árboles (trees)
- el arco iris (rainbow)
- la playa (beach)
- el verano (summer)
- las tormentas (storms)
- las telarañas (spider webs)
- las rosas (roses)

los deportes (sports)
- el fútbol (soccer)
- el fútbol americano (football)
- el beisbol (baseball)

otras (others
- el perfume (perfume)
- los regalos (presents)
- las computadoras (computers)
- las vacaciones (vacations)
- el teatro (theater)
- los muebles (furniture)
- los cuadros (paintings)
- los lujos (luxuries)
- el sexo (sex)
- los fines de semana (weekends)
- las camas de agua (waterbeds)
- las películas (movies)
- los poemas (poems)
- los campleaños (birthdays)
- las cartas (letters)
- el éxito (success)
- los barcos (boats)
- la educación (education)

*This is the first list of vocabulary the students are given. In many ways it gives them a headstart, because many of these items are covered in later sections of the book (food, clothing, the family, etc.).

ADJECTIVES TO DESCRIBE THINGS

(SELECTED BY STUDENTS)

gordo (fat)	delgado (thin)
inteligente (intelligent)	estúpido (stupid)
pequeño (small)	grande (large)
rico (rich)	pobre (poor)
barato (cheap)	caro (expensive)
suave (soft)	duro (hard)
bonito (pretty)	feo (ugly)
interesante (interesting)	aburrido (boring)
nuevo (new)	viejo (old)
útil (useful)	inútil (useless)
fácil (easy)	difícil (difficult)
pesado (heavy)	ligero (light)
bueno (good)	malo (bad)
legal	ilegal
*sucio (dirty)	*limpio (clear)
lento (slow)	rápido (fast)
*caliente (hot)	*frío (cold)

simpático (nice)	raro (rare)
brillante (bright)	circular (circular)
espantoso (scarry)	peludo (furry, hairy)
hermoso (gorgeous)	gigante (gigantic)
delicioso (delicious)	fabuloso (fabulous)
enorme (enormous)	redondo (round)
divertido (fun)	excitante (exciting)
*ocupado (busy)	maravilloso (marvelous)
extravagante (extravagant)	increíble (incredible)
chulo (cute)	ridículo (ridiculous)
chocante (shocking)	genérico (generic)

*These descriptive words (adjectives) change quickly, so to say "it is," you use "está." To say "they are," you use "están."

The other descriptive words are more or less permanent descriptions, so "it is" is "es," and "they are" is "son."

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For homework, write ten simple sentences describing items on the first page (for example: La ropa es cara; El arco iris es bonito; Los animales son chulos y bonitos; Las vacas son gordas; etc.).

Don't forget to make adjectives agree masculine/feminine/singular/plural!

Useful little words: y (and); o (or); pero (but)

Sample drill to practice asking and answering questions in the preterit. To be done by students orally in class, in pairs.

Find out if your partner did these things last summer.*	Sí, mucho (Yes, a lot	Sí (Yes)	A veces (Sometimes	Un poco (A little)	No	No, nunca (No, never)
nadar en el océano (to swim in the ocean)**						
comer en un restaurante muy extravagante						
mirar "Dynasty" (to watch Dynasty)						
caminar en el bosque (to walk in the forest)						
trabajar mucho (to work a lot)						
viajar a México (to travel to Mexico)						
escribir cartas de amor (to write love letters)						
beber mucho té helado (to drink a lot of iced tea)						

* The activities chosen for the chart were selected from the list of activities the students said they liked to do.

** The English words would not be present on the students' charts.